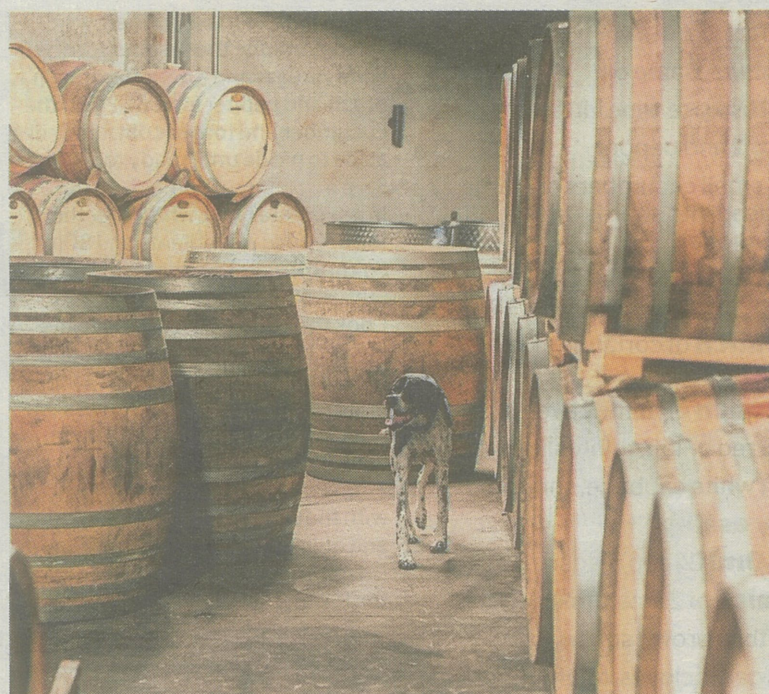




## Cover story



# Cellar-door etiquette for beginners

These insider tips will have you tasting wines at the cellar door like a pro.

Australia's wine regions are dotted with some of the most spectacular and approachable tasting rooms in the world, but for the uninitiated, the do's and don'ts of wine tasting can be overwhelming.

"If you aren't super into wine, a visit to a cellar door can be a little intimidating," says Tom Southwell from Tumbarumba's Johansen Wines. "A great cellar-door experience should be both educational and fun. I love it when customers let me guide them through our journey into farming and our wines."

The way we taste wine has changed since COVID-19 restrictions rocked venues across the nation, arguably for the better.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with other visitors at a tasting bench and vying for a staff member's attention is a thing of the past. Bookable tasting flights are the new norm and offer a more leisurely experience and insight into a wine brand's story and beverages. But this new chapter in the wine-tasting landscape comes with a fresh set of rules. Before you hit the road, it's important to plan your day. These simple tips will have you tasting like a pro.

### Book ahead - even on Mondays

Not all tasting rooms welcome walk-ins. Save yourself time and embarrassment by checking a winery's website or social media account before you arrive. "We always try to accommodate walk-ins. However, sometimes you simply can't fit an extra booking in," says Hannah Vinden, co-owner of Hunter Valley's Vinden Wines. "Making a reservation online in advance not only helps the winery be organised and staff accordingly (during vintage, most cellar doors run on skeleton staff), but it saves any disappointment if you're unable to be squeezed in."

Can't get a last-minute table? Don't get mouthy via a Google review. "Don't blame the winery for being popular," Vinden says. "If there are a few empty tables when you get turned away, they are

more than likely reserved for incoming bookings."

### Don't drink and drive

Decide on a designated driver well before you set off. Better yet, book a driver so that you can enjoy a few tipples without the worry. Most wine regions have a variety of tour guides, bus charters, private cars and taxi services available. No matter which you opt for, do the right thing and keep to the schedule. Wrangling tardy, tipsy tasters is no fun for anyone.

### Dress code

On the clothing front, smart casual ticks most boxes. More importantly, leave the perfume and cologne at home (or at least go easy on it). Nothing ruins a wine's aromatic nuance like a wave of "Nana perfume" or an over-enthusiastic dose of Aesop's finest.

"When patrons visit a cellar door wearing perfumes, aftershave, face oils and freshly brushed teeth, it takes away the overall experience of wine tasting and appreciation," says Seville Hill winemaker and owner John D'Aloisio. Fellow Yarra Valley winemaker and owner at Steels Creek Estate Simon Peirce agrees. "Strong perfumes and aftershave impact patrons who are trying to appreciate a wine's bouquet."

And if you simply must wear lipstick, invest in a long-wear variety; lippy-smudged glassware is never a good look.

### Be nice

It sounds simple but a little courtesy goes a long way and a smile sets the tone for a great tasting. "We like to talk about wine, the vineyard, vintage, etc, so have patience if we don't pour the next one straight away," says Lucy Fisher, cellar-door manager at

Yarra Valley's Soumah. Sally Scarborough, from Hunter Valley's Scarborough Wines, adds: "Chat to the staff - that's what they are there for. It doesn't have to be specifically about the wines; it could be about where the best coffee shops are. Chatting to our staff just might uncover a love for a style of wine or a variety that you never knew existed."

### Don't pour your own wine

Occasionally, staff will leave a bottle at your table (for all those Insta snaps). This is not an invitation to help yourself. "Remember, it's not a dinner party," Scarborough says. "That's tantamount to leaning over the bar at a restaurant, grabbing a bottle and topping your glass up. If you'd like to taste a wine again, just ask, but please remember you're on licensed premises."

On that note, drink responsibly. "We are obligated to practise responsible service of alcohol, so we would like you to taste responsibly," Scarborough says. "It can sometimes be a little

difficult to know how much wine you have been consuming from cellar door to cellar door, so just ask your server. Most of our tastings equate to a standard drink."

### There's no such thing as a stupid question

"If you are unsure of something, ask it," says

Daniel Mortimer from family-run Mortimers Wines in Orange, New South Wales. "Especially if you're a beginner looking to learn more about the wine industry. Take time to listen to the wine steward serving wine, as the stories and history behind the winery are often fascinating." And while it sounds obvious, tune in when knowledgeable cellar door staff are talking. "A wine tasting is an





by Katie Spain



The tasting space at Ten Minutes by Tractor (left). Opposite page from top: Gilbert Family Wines; Seville Hill winemaker John D'Aloisio; tasting at Cupitt's Estate; Louis, one of Cupitt's cellar-door dogs; and (inset) Pt. Leo Estate. Photos: Chris McConville (main), Jessie Ann Harris, Alex Jovanovic, Elise Hassey, Katherine Jamison, Rhiannon Taylor

"It's not always about trying the most expensive or highly awarded wines, but more importantly, about finding styles that suit your palate which are highly enjoyable and moreish."

### Don't BYO

"Yep, it happens," Vinden says. "Please don't rock up to a tasting with a beer in hand, an empty coffee cup or your leftover breakfast. Not only is it disrespectful to assume the crew will clean up after you, it also impairs your taste buds."

### Kids and pets

Most cellar doors will clearly state whether pets and children are welcome on their patch of turf. Those that boast playgrounds and doggy treats tend to be vocal and proud about it. If in doubt, book a babysitter.

### Don't assume you can walk in the vineyard

"A lot of vineyards have strict quarantine protocols to protect them from the spread of diseases, like phylloxera," says Rohit Singh, winemaker at Mornington Peninsula's Avani Wines. "Always ask the cellar-door team before entering the vineyard."

### Don't visit too many wineries in the one day

"Try spending more time at fewer wineries to have the best experience," Singh adds. "Your palate will get tired."

opportunity to learn about different wines and the production process," says Martin Spedding, owner of Mornington Peninsula's Ten Minutes by Tractor. "Cellar-door staff are knowledgeable and passionate about wine, so treat them with respect and don't hesitate to ask any questions."

### Don't argue the tasting fee

The extra care and planning that goes into tasting flights often involves a tasting fee (about \$10 a head is common for a standard tasting). Some tasting fees are redeemable on the purchase of wine but this, too, is becoming a thing of the past. Fair enough, too.

Wine costs money to grow and make, and overheads include cellar-door staff wages, vineyard maintenance, rent and power. You don't walk into a restaurant expecting great service and a couple of entrees for free. Wine should be no different.

"You'd pay at least double the cost of the tasting fee to enjoy those same wines in a wine bar," Vinden says. "And you wouldn't receive the same informative insight to the wines as you would from the person that made the wine or grew the grapes."

### Swirl, sniff, sip, spit

Follow this mantra and you can't go wrong. Take time to look at the colour and enjoy the aromas of the wine in the glass before taking that first sip. "Taste each wine two or three times to allow your palate time to adjust," Spedding says. "This will give you the most accurate impression of the wine."

Most importantly, use the spittoon. "Spitting wine out after tasting is common practice and is not considered rude," Spedding says. "This will ensure you fully enjoy your experience at each cellar door without fatiguing your palate." You'll also avoid getting rolling drunk.

### Stay hydrated

In order to keep that blood-alcohol level down and your concentration levels high, it's important to hydrate. Water is available at all cellar doors. Drink it. "Avoid rinsing your glass with water after each wine, unless you are moving back from red to white or a wine has a strong character," Spedding says. "Water left in the glass can dilute or change the wine's balance. A glass seasoned with wine is considered to be better than a glass seasoned with water."

### Factor food into the day

Eat a decent breakfast and decide before you set off whether to secure a restaurant booking, pack a picnic (some cellar doors invite you to bring snacks) or make the most of platters or picnic hampers available on site. Again, it is advisable to plan ahead and if you go the DIY route, to check with cellar-door staff before turning up with a full picnic spread.

### Step outside your comfort zone

Wine tasting should be an adventure, so ditch preconceived ideas about a region, variety or style. "The most important thing to remember is to always be open-minded," says Sutherland Estate winemaker and owner Cathy Phelan. "Don't be biased or afraid to try things that you wouldn't normally go for in a bottle shop. Regions and even producers of the same varietal can vary enormously depending on the microclimate of the site and the specific winemaking techniques."

The Australian wine landscape has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Even staunch ABC (Anything But Chardonnay) drinkers can find themselves pleasantly surprised. "I often hear people say something along the lines of, 'I don't normally like chardonnay but this is delicious!'" Phelan says. "Or, 'imagine this gewurz with our Thai tonight'."

### To buy or not to buy?

If you love a wine, make a purchase. But don't feel embarrassed if you don't. "No customer is obliged to purchase wine," says Nicole Thomson, wine club manager at Victoria's Best's Great Western. "This is why we started to offer paid experiences, so that guests who want to try higher-end wines don't feel obliged to purchase."

"We believe that if the guest has had a wonderful experience with us, they will tell someone – so it's not always about a sale. But we love it when they do [buy]," she adds.

If you do buy a bottle or a dozen, the warm fuzzies have the potential to linger long after you leave. "Keep in mind that when you do purchase from a cellar door, 100 per cent of that money goes to support that family and farm," Southwell says. "And you get to think about that when you open that bottle at home."

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